



NEWS

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FEDERAL, STATE COOPERATION SECURES "STAY OF EXECUTION" FOR CALIFORNIA BIRDS

California is becoming a safer place for migratory birds thanks to the California Department of Corrections, the California Department of Fish and Game, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The installation of netting on electrified security fences at 13 California state prisons has dramatically reduced the number of birds inadvertently electrocuted at those facilities.

"Cooperation is our preferred way to eliminate threats to wildlife that are the byproducts of human activity and technology," said Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark. "We commend the Corrections Department and state wildlife officials for working with us to protect migratory birds and other species that represent an important part of California's natural heritage."

Since the nets were installed, bird deaths caused by the electrified security fences have dropped nearly 93 percent. The Department of Corrections turned on the first of the new fences in October 1993; the first bird fatality was recorded that same month. More than 3,000 protected birds have died statewide since the fence installation program began. That death toll includes 144 burrowing owls, a species that may be proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act because of its dwindling numbers.

The electrified fences, which now encircle 25 of the state's correction facilities, save California taxpayers millions of dollars each year in prison operating costs. Installed between a pair of traditional chain-link security fences, the lethal barriers eliminate the need for 24-hour staffing at most prison guard towers. Unfortunately, contact with two wires or a wire and a post can also prove deadly to birds that perch on or fly into the fences.

"We were looking for ways to improve efficiency, cut costs, and maintain security. Bird fatalities were an unforeseen, unintended, and ultimately unacceptable consequence of the electrified fence project," said C.A. Terhune, director of the California Department of Corrections.

Discussions between the Service and the Corrections Department began shortly after the first bird fatalities were reported. Under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, one of the Nation's oldest

wildlife conservation laws, it is illegal to kill any of more than 800 protected species of birds. The act covers such intentional violations as poaching, but also applies to inadvertent deaths caused by any human activity.

"Many of our wildlife protection laws hold people, institutions, and businesses responsible for the results of their acts, even when no harm is intended," Clark explained. "We have found, however, that we can often best achieve conservation through the type of cooperation secured from the California Corrections Department and the state Department of Fish and Game."

The netting installations were undertaken as a result of a comprehensive environmental impact study conducted by the Department of Corrections with the assistance of state and Federal wildlife specialists. As part of this effort, the Department monitored wildlife fatalities at each fenced facility to determine which species were at risk and what habitat and operational factors might be involved. Engineers, biologists, and others working on the project then identified, designed, and tested a variety of mitigation measures.

"We've already taken steps to make our facilities less attractive to wildlife," said Corrections Director Terhune. "Work on specific deterrents and exclusionary devices suggests that we can find reasonably effective ways to keep birds away from the fences without jeopardizing prison security."

Results from the facilities where nets were installed last year support that conclusion. At the state prison in Sacramento, for example, 991 birds had been electrocuted since the electrified security fence was turned on in December 1994. Nets were installed at the beginning of August and only two birds died at the facility in the remaining months of 1997. At that rate, five or six fatalities could be expected annually, compared to the more than 300 recorded on average each year before netting.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials believe the progress made in resolving this problem in California may pay off elsewhere in the country. "We understand that other jurisdictions are considering installing similar fencing," Clark said. "California's efforts to protect migratory birds provide a guide that should help other states adopt this type of security system without sacrificing wildlife."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The agency's 94 million acres include 512 national wildlife refuges, 78 ecological services field stations, 65 national fish hatcheries, 50 wildlife coordination areas, and 38 wetland management districts with waterfowl production areas.